

From Cape to Cape

With its stunning scenery, laidback locals and gastronomic delights, Western Australia's Margaret River is so much more than a wine-soaked getaway, says Mary Weaver

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Tucking into my breakfast “with the works”, I hear the strum of a guitar on the stereo at Wild Thyme Gourmet and within seconds, the staff in the café start singing along to Tracy Chapman’s bluesy tune “Give Me One Reason”. This convivial scene is one that instantly sums up my experience of travelling through Margaret River. Yes, the scenery is stunning and the wine is fantastic, but it’s the people that make the area so memorable.

The residents of Margaret River know they’ve found a sweet spot in the world, and everywhere you turn, they’re shouting their love from the rooftops and offering recommendations for where to visit next. “Don’t miss the drive towards Hamelin Bay,” says Wild Thyme’s owner Laura, “the scenery is truly spectacular”. “Take the tourist drive to see millionaire’s row at Meelup Beach on Bunker Bay”, says Tim at Yallingup Lodge, “and then swing back and have a beer at the Caves House Hotel”. “Chuck a right onto Albany Terrace to drive past Seine Bay in Augusta” says Paul at Leeuwin Lighthouse, “you might see some pelicans”. I duly add each and every tip to

my itinerary and, as expected, all are worthy of inclusion.

Considering that Margaret River is a world-famous wine region, it comes as a surprise to learn that it has been only 40 years since the first vines were planted here. Fast forward to today, and there are more than 200 vineyards and 100 wineries sprinkled across the region, ranging from large-scale establishments that produce thousands of tonnes of wine per year to boutique, family-run businesses that might produce only 60 tonnes.

As soon as you veer off the highway, the cellar doors start appearing. Caves Road, which runs virtually parallel to the Bussell Highway, is the spine that connects the entire region. From Cape Naturaliste in the north to Cape Leeuwin in the south, it’s about 100km. I opt to stay two nights in Yallingup in the north and head farther south to the Margaret River township – affectionately known as “Margs” by the locals – for the next two nights. This offers me the opportunity to explore the entire region from cape to cape. ◻



Vasse Felix



Redgate Beach



Xanadu winery



Tom's Vineyard



The Horse Resort



Caves Road



Freya Hohnen runs McHenry's Farm Shop



Vasse Felix's longtime chef Aaron Carr



Brett Gaskin of the award-winning olive oil farm Olio Bello

And what a region it is. Only three-and-a-half hours from Perth on the new and improved highway ("No more traffic lights!" say the locals), the region offers so much diversity it's hard to know where to begin. To make things easy, I hook up with John Harvey of Az You Like It wine tours. First reason: I can indulge in some world-famous wines at various cellar doors without fear of going over the driving limit. Secondly, he's a treasure trove of information. A Northern Ireland-born former mining executive, John is typical of many of the people I meet over the next few days – transplanted folks from a variety of backgrounds who've moved to Margaret River to start new lives and careers in a place they call "God's country".

While touring the region, it's easy to see what attracted the newcomers. I put it to Christo Edwards of Edwards winery that he's got himself a pretty good gig, what with a surf beach at his doorstep, a family winery to run and an airstrip for a light plane on his property. "Yep, I won't argue", he says. "Life's good." Andrea, the German-Danish owner of Arc of Iris, a small and lively restaurant in the township, says I'm in for a surprise. "It's not as sleepy as you think," she says. "There's always something on here. It's not just a Christmas and Easter holiday place."

"But don't be fooled," says John, "the locals are deceptively laidback yet exceptionally passionate and focused." Michael Whyte, the general manager of Vasse Felix winery, agrees: "I've been here for 20 years and what's happened to the region is just incredible. The tourists and visiting workers such as grape pickers and restaurant staff are just as important as those winemakers who've grown up here. They give an amazing energy and sense of renewal to the place."

The environment is a huge drawing card for residents and tourists alike. With 400 million sqm of national parks in the region, it's a nature-lovers' dream, and the natural bush and vegetation is protected against further

development. You won't find ten-story hotel blocks anywhere. Here, it's all about smaller bed and breakfasts, ten-room lodges and sophisticated yet cosy boutique hotels.

Winemakers are drawn to the Mediterranean climate with its dry summers and wet winters. The consistent, clean, big waves of the south-west coastline attract budding surfers and professionals from all over the globe to the beaches of Yallingup, Gracetown and Prevelly. And business operators are seduced by the diverse environment, which is ripe for rock climbing, horseback riding, sailing, caving and bush walking. Sitting atop my very own steed the following day while taking a riding lesson at The Horse Resort, which occupies a two million sqm tract of land north-west of the township, I'm again overwhelmed by the beauty of the region. This is Australia, but not as I know it. As my instructor Sam Watson says, "why would I live anywhere else?" At that moment, a rainbow appears. It's almost too much.

Apart from its spectacular scenery, the region has also developed a reputation as a gourmet paradise, with everything from award-winning fine dining restaurants and upmarket providores to cosy cafés all in

the business of tickling tourists' taste buds. "The best rule of thumb is to head to the wineries for a long lunch and stick to town for dinner," says Harvey. Although, there are certainly exceptions to be made, such as the fresh pasta at Olio Bello, an olive oil farm with an al fresco café, the beef pies and lamb burgers at the Berry Farm's charming cottage café and the home-made cakes with coffee at McHenry's Farm Shop. But if you're on a mission to do the fine-dining winery thing, you're spoiled for choice. Some of Australia's best chefs can be found at celebrated wineries such as Vasse Felix, Xanadu and Voyager, where you can indulge in long lunches at tables overlooking rows of grapes.

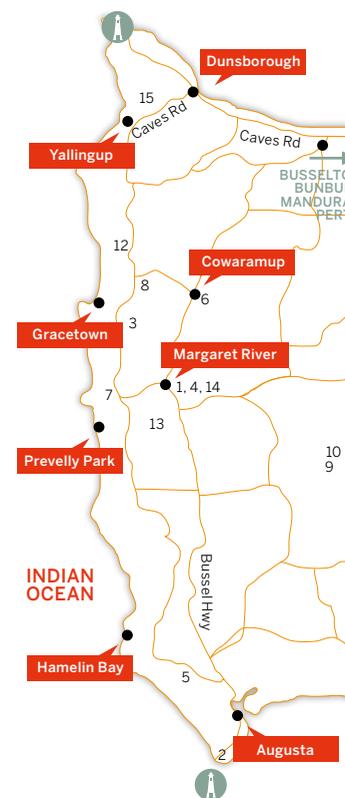
Even with all the scenery, food and adventure outings on offer, it's hard to miss the region's biggest drawing card – the



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GETTING THERE

From Perth, head south along Kwinana Freeway, which becomes Forrest Highway until Bunbury, then follow the signs to the Bussell Highway. From Bunker Bay in the north to Augusta in the south, it's about a 90-minute drive. For a more detailed map, visit the Margaret River Visitor Centre in town, tel: +61 (0)8 9780 5955



- 1 Arc of Iris
- 2 Cape Leeuwin Lighthouse
- 3 Edwards Wines
- 4 Heritage Trail Lodge
- 5 Jewel Cave
- 6 Margaret River Wine Centre
- 7 McHenry's Farm Shop
- 8 Olio Bello
- 9 Rockfield Estate
- 10 The Berry Farm
- 11 The Horse Resort
- 12 Vasse Felix
- 13 Xanadu Wines
- 14 Wild Thyme Gourmet
- 15 Yallingup Lodge

PHOTOGRAPHY: STEPHEN BLAKENEY (TOP LEFT & BELOW)

wine. Chardonnay, Cabernet Sauvignon and Cabernet blends are the region's most celebrated wine varieties but you'll also find Shiraz and more unconventional varieties like Sangiovese and Zinfandels in some of the smaller wineries.

At the family-run boutique winery Rockfield Estate in the Rosa Glen district, further inland from the usual suspects on Caves Road, I chat with owner and viticulturalist Alex Gaman about how best to tour the region. "A bottle of wine is a romance and a trip away from everyday stress," he says. "Get out there and visit cellar doors. Four to five per day would be best. Mix it up and visit a couple of wineries in the north, two in the centre and one farther south. Even in a region like this, there can be huge variety in the taste." Vasse Felix's Michael Whyte has a similar take: "I call it passive tourism. People who don't know a lot about wine can feel comfortable and not daunted as they will be related to on their level. They can have a wine experience, then go to the beach or go caving." And for those who don't know their Chardonnays from their Viogniers? "Don't let wine snobs intimidate you" says Gaman. "Ask lots of questions, taste lots of wine and drink what you enjoy. If you open your mouth and ask an honest question, you'll never be wrong."

On that note, I take a seat on the adjoining patio with wine glass in hand and tuck into an antipasto plate of local cheeses and olives, while humming away quietly to that Tracy Chapman tune from earlier in my trip. Give me one reason to stay here? I can think of hundreds. ●



The cellar door at Vasse Felix

Tiger Airways flies to Perth from Singapore and Melbourne. Book flights at www.tigerairways.com

WHERE TO STAY

- **Heritage Trail Lodge**, 31 Bussell Hwy, Margaret River, tel: +61 (0)8 9575 9596
- **Yallingup Lodge Spa Retreat**, Hemsley Rd, Yallingup, tel: +61 (0) 9755 2411

ADDRESS BOOK

- **Arc of Iris**, 151 Bussell Hwy, Margaret River, tel: +61 (0)8 9757 3112
- **Az U Like It Tours**, tel: +61 (0)407 082 133
- **The Berry Farm**, 43 Bessell Rd, Rosa Glen, tel: +61 (0)8 9757 5054
- **Cape Leeuwin Lighthouse**, Augusta, tel: +61 (0)8 9780 5911
- **Edwards Wines**, 687 Ellen Brook Rd, Cowaramup, tel: +61 (0)8 9755 5999
- **Jewel Cave**, Caves Rd, Augusta, tel:

- +61 (0)8 9757 7411
- **Margaret River Regional Wine Centre**, Bussell Hwy, Cowaramup, tel: +61 (0)8 9755 5501
- **McHenry's Farm Shop**, 7000 Caves Rd, Margaret River, tel: +61 (0)8 9757 9684
- **Olio Bello**, 36 Armstrong Rd (off the corner of Caves Rd and Cowaramup Bay Rd), tel: +61 (0)8 9755 9771
- **Rockfield Estate**, 215 Rosa Glen Rd, Rosa Glen, tel: +61 (0)8 9757 5006

- **The Horse Resort**, Osmington Rd, Margaret River, tel: +61 (0) 9757 4444
- **Vasse Felix**, Cnr Harmans Rd S and Caves Rd, Cowaramup, tel: +61 (0)8 9756 5000
- **Wild Thyme Gourmet**, 72 Wilmott Ave, Margaret River, tel: +61 (0)8 9757 2237
- **Xanadu Wines**, Boodjidup Rd, Margaret River, tel: +61 (0)8 9758 9500